

The New York Times<https://nyti.ms/2f0EUgx>

ASIA PACIFIC

Across China, Walmart Faces Labor Unrest as Authorities Stand Aside

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By JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ NOV. 16, 2016

SHENZHEN, China — In a one-man war room in his apartment, a laid-off Walmart employee named Wang Shishu was tapping out a message on his phone to a group of workers and plotting his next move.

Over the past few months, Mr. Wang, 56, has helped organize a national movement in China against Walmart. Labor strikes have hit stores in the south simultaneously. There have been boycotts in the northeast. And here in Shenzhen, where Walmart opened its first outlet in China two decades ago, employees have filed a lawsuit demanding back pay.

“We want a snowball effect,” he said in the booming baritone of a street preacher. “We want everybody to know what to do next.”

As the Chinese economy has slowed, strikes and labor protests have broken out across the country, mostly scattered episodes targeting a single factory or business. The government has responded aggressively, detaining activists and increasing censorship to keep unrest from spreading.

But activism against Walmart’s more than 400 stores in China in recent months has followed a different pattern: workers in several cities agitating against the same

company, bypassing official unions controlled by the Communist Party and using social media to coordinate their actions — while the authorities largely stand aside.

Across China, Walmart employees have raised their fists at protests, chanting, “Workers, stand up!” They have appealed to local officials with patriotic fervor, invoking the struggles of Mao Zedong against foreign imperialists. They have posted screeds online against unkind bosses and “union puppets.”

In doing so, the Chinese work force of the world’s largest retail chain has put the ruling Communist Party in an uncomfortable position, publicly testing its Marxist commitment to defend the working class and pitting that against its fear of independent labor activism.

Ever since the Solidarity trade union helped topple Communist rule in Poland, Beijing has sought to prevent the emergence of a nationwide labor movement, suppressing efforts by workers to organize across industries or localities.

But the authorities appear to be hesitating in the case of Walmart, whose workers have complained of low wages and a new scheduling system they say has left them poorer and exhausted.

In recent months, as many as 20,000 people, about a fifth of the company’s work force in China, have joined messaging groups set up by Mr. Wang and other activists on WeChat, a popular app. In these forums, they vent about company policies, share protest slogans and discuss plans to coordinate demonstrations for maximum effect.

Mr. Wang, a former customer service representative whom Walmart has fired twice, spends his days babysitting his granddaughter and trading messages with workers across the country, often as late as 2 a.m.

“What they’re doing is inhumane,” he said. “I want Walmart to return to the sympathetic company it used to be.”

Eli Friedman, a labor scholar at Cornell University, said the Walmart movement was “probably the most substantive example of sustained, cross-workplace, independent worker organizing we’ve ever seen in China’s private sector.”

The government appears to be keeping a distance because it is worried about provoking a backlash, or about acting on behalf of a prominent American company against Chinese workers at a time when nationalism in China is rising.

But by doing little or nothing, it risks encouraging disaffected workers elsewhere, especially at the growing number of national chain businesses with operations across China. Already, workers at Neutrogena stores and China Unicom, a state-owned telecom operator, have used similar tactics, while avoiding serious punishment.

“We can only expect that online organizing will continue to break down local barriers,” said Keegan Elmer, a researcher for China Labour Bulletin, an advocacy group based in Hong Kong.

The retail sector in particular has become a hotbed of worker activism. The government wants to shift growth from manufacturing to service industries, but many new jobs at restaurants, hotels and stores are low-paying or part-time.

From July through September, there were 124 strikes and protests at service-sector firms, about double the number last year, outpacing episodes in manufacturing for the first time since at least 2011, according to China Labour Bulletin.

Chinese law requires businesses to establish labor unions, but they are almost always controlled by management, and companies generally use the unions to contain worker activism. In the face of labor strife, some businesses have offered back pay, bonuses and other benefits to workers.

But others, concerned that labor activism could force costly concessions, have resorted to tougher tactics, retaliating against those who help organize protests. At Walmart, some of the most vocal workers have been deprived of raises, reassigned, or in some cases fired, according to interviews with more than a dozen employees.

At one store in Zhongshan, west of Shenzhen, a labor activist said a supervisor photographed her in the bathroom as retribution for speaking out. She asked not to be identified for fear of further antagonizing her bosses.

Much of the discontent stems from a new scheduling system that Walmart put in place this summer as a way, the company said, of giving workers more flexibility. Workers have argued that it has resulted in cuts to overtime pay and excessively long shifts, and some say they were coerced into signing new contracts agreeing to the system.

Walmart denied that it had treated its employees unfairly or had pressured them to accept the new schedules. Rebecca Lui, a spokeswoman, said that the vast majority of its work force supported the new system, and that employees were free to keep their old schedules.

“Our associates are our most valuable asset,” she said in a statement.

Zhai Xiuhua, a former greeter at a Walmart store in Shenzhen, said she was fired in September after leading a fight against the new scheduling system.

“I told them, ‘Even if you put a knife to my neck, I’ll never agree,’” she recalled at her home, where her uniform and identification badge — No. 14470 — still hang on the wall. Ms. Zhai, worried about medical bills, says she now hopes to find work in her hometown in the southwestern province of Sichuan.

Walmart, which has resisted unionization at its thousands of stores across the world, was forced by the government in 2006 to establish branches of the Communist Party-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions for its roughly 100,000 Chinese employees, part of a broader push by the party to unionize foreign businesses.

But union branches at many Walmart stores are under the thumb of store managers, and higher-level union officials appear torn about how to respond to complaints from workers like Ms. Zhai.

While union officials here in Guangdong Province have criticized Walmart for not seeking governmental approval for the new scheduling system, they have not taken more forceful action or helped mobilize workers.

Labor activists at Walmart have cited the ideals of President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party’s history of protecting workers, and experts said they appeared to

be benefiting from a belief among some officials that the influence of foreign companies such as Walmart should be curtailed.

“If the Chinese authorities try to suppress the workers on behalf of Walmart,” said Wang Jiangsong, a Chinese labor scholar, “it will hurt the country’s image.”

When Walmart opened its first store in China in 1996, workers rushed to snap up jobs that paid more than those at Chinese competitors.

Now, some employees say, a Walmart job does not pay enough to comfortably support a family, with wages hovering around minimum wage, or about \$300 a month. While Walmart has led a high-profile campaign in the United States to raise pay, salaries in China have remained largely stagnant, workers said, barely keeping pace with inflation.

Walmart has struggled to keep up with the fast-changing tastes of Chinese consumers and tried to re-energize its business by making investments in online retailers.

But the continuing labor unrest poses a potential hurdle.

You Tianyu, 45, a customer service employee at a Walmart store in Shenzhen, caught the attention of her supervisors in August when she wrote a letter to the president of Walmart, Doug McMillon, to complain about the company’s efforts to silence aggrieved workers.

Ms. You said her bosses now harassed her daily because she spoke out, and she has received a diagnosis of anxiety and depression.

She spends most of her nonworking hours rummaging through a mess of worker manifestoes, union laws and pay slips in her tiny apartment, hoping to find a new line of attack against Walmart.

“I’m on the verge of collapsing,” she said. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll last.”

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A version of this article appears in print on November 17, 2016, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: As Employees Battle Walmart, China Warily Holds Its Tongue.

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